5

Empson and the Gifts of China

Jason Harding

> Attending there let us absorb the cultures of nations
> And dissolve into our judgement all their codes.
>
> 'Homage to the British Museum' (1932)
>
> A more heartening fact about the cultures of man
> Is their appalling stubbornness.
>
> 'Sonnet' (1942)[1]

William Empson cherished 'our strong and critical curiosity about alien modes of feeling, our need for the flying buttress of sympathy with systems other than our own' (*EG* 32). It was a belief that fuelled a sustained attempt to foster deeper understanding between the cultural traditions of Europe and Asia. However, after seven years as a university professor in China, Empson did not underestimate the difficulties of a rapprochement between two civilizations separated by what he conceived of as a profound difference of theology. John Haffenden's narrative of the extraordinary years Empson spent in China during the turbulent upheaval of the Sino-Japanese War (1937–9) and throughout the Civil War and the Communist takeover (1947–52) has transformed the context in which scholars and critics approach the worldliness of the later poetry and criticism, peppered with anecdote and offhand personal testimony. And yet, a decade of 'attending' to Asian cultures had taught Empson a tough

[1] *CP* 55, 101.

lesson about the 'appalling stubbornness' of one's own cultural formation. In fact, the problematic nature of adaptation to life in Chinese society is placed in striking relief in the case of Empson's intellectual and imaginative development. His comprehension of China, shaped at first through literary sources, had to confront a series of deconstructive jolts. Empson could not simply absorb Chinese culture like a traveller sipping tea, but nor did he arrogantly appropriate the idea of 'China' from Orientalist discourses—the situation is far more complex, requiring a detailed attention to the variegated references to China in his writings. The questions this chapter seeks to address are less concerned with what Empson *saw* or *felt* or *did* in China, than with what he *made* of these experiences in his literary criticism and poetry; in other words, how was Empson able to activate or transform his encounters with Chinese people, places, poetry, and politics in the domain of English literature. The focus here will be on concrete examples of his engagement with China: the concept of the East evident in the early critical writings; his poetic representation of China in *The Gathering Storm*; the impact of his two periods of residence in China on his later critical thinking; and concluding with the use of these experiences as part of a critique of the myopia of English literary critics.

'The wisdom of the East': Harmony in Conflict

Before Empson had ever set foot in Asia, a range of textual sources served to whet his appetite for an engagement with Chinese civilization. As an undergraduate he was influenced by senior members of Cambridge University, most notably Goldsworthy Lowes Dickinson, who sought to position China in the minds of an English audience as a repository of wisdom, tolerance, and tranquility.[2] This idealized vision of a harmonious, agrarian China and of the esoteric 'wisdom of the East' elided the poverty, misery, and political turmoil in the fledgling Chinese Republic.[3] Yet for Western liberal intellectuals, this conception of 'China' served as an alternative to the

FN:2

FN:3

[2] See E. M. Forster on Dickinson: 'In a life which contained much disillusionment, China never failed him . . . Politeness, gaiety, imagination, good taste—these he found or thought he found'; cited in E. M. Forster, *Goldsworthy Lowes Dickinson* (1934; London: Arnold, 1973), 117, 126.

[3] *The Wisdom of the East Series*, containing volumes on Chinese poetry and philosophy, edited by L. Cranmer-Byng *et al.*, had been steadily appearing from the publisher John Murray since 1904.

imperialism and industrialism that were often blamed for contributing to the devastation of the First World War. As a president of the Heretics Society, which had rewarded Dickinson with honorary membership, Empson moved in these circles of Cambridge liberal world-mindedness. Several of his contributions to the undergraduate magazine *Granta* reveal the impression of this intellectual milieu. After attending a Christian missionary lecture on China, Empson bought Rodney Gilbert's pamphlet *What's Wrong with China?* (1926). His review countered the slur that the Chinese were an 'inferior race'. On the contrary, Empson expressed a strong desire that the Chinese would absorb any assault emanating from the 'barbarian' Anglo-Saxons.[4] In fact, in his reviews for *Granta* he went to considerable lengths to suggest the West could learn greater moderation from the East. Reviewing a memoir by an exiled Chinese politician, Empson concluded that the 'maturity' of Chinese customs highlighted the West's 'lack of courtesy, restraint, and poise'. In a similar vein, in a review of Arthur Waley's translation of *The Tale of Genji*, he confessed to a feeling of 'our civilization's inferiority' to the graciousness of the East. More significantly, Empson praised the 'extraordinarily high' level of Waley's compendium of translations, *Poems from the Chinese* (*EG* 23, 55, 24).

FN:4

It is instructive that it was Arthur Waley, rather than Ezra Pound, who introduced Empson to Chinese classical poetry. Waley's translations may have had (in the words of W. B. Yeats) 'more learning but less subtlety of rhythm' than Pound's *Cathay* (1915), yet they provided a poetic texture that Pound's ignorance of Mandarin could not supply: that is, approximations of the conventions of Chinese poetic tradition, together with allusions to the original socio-historical contexts of these poems.[5] It was Waley and not the 'Imagist' Pound who opened Empson's eyes to the abundance of multiple meanings in Chinese literature. *Seven Types of Ambiguity* quoted lines from Waley's translation of the poetry of Tao Qian to illustrate ambiguity of the first type; namely, 'comparisons with several points of likeness, antithesis with several points of difference'. Empson's analysis of the lines 'Swiftly the years, beyond recall. | Solemn the stillness of this spring morning' draws out 'the profundity of feeling' that emerges from the clash of different time-scales apprehended in a single experience.

FN:5

[4] See 'Just a Blond', supplement to *EG*.

[5] W. B. Yeats, 'Introduction', *Oxford Book of Modern Verse* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1936), p. xl.

The detachment of the large perspective encourages a feeling 'that there is nothing to be done about life' and that 'it must be regarded from a peaceable and fatalistic point of view' whereas the smaller, more urgently engaged one causes the reader to 'consider the neighbouring space, an activity of the will, delicacies of social tone and your personality' (*STA* 43–4). Empson's minor misquotation of Waley's translation does not affect his argument.

> Swiftly the years, beyond recall.
> Solemn the stillness of this fair morning.
> I will clothe myself in spring-clothing
> And visit the slopes of the Eastern Hill.
> By the mountain-stream a mist hovers,
> Hovers a moment, then scatters.
> There comes a wind blowing from the south
> That brushes the fields of new corn.[6]

FN:6

In a direct allusion to the Confucian *Analects*, Tao Qian's poem announces a search for personal happiness amidst the rejuvenated spring landscape.[7] The grandeur of seasonal change implicitly diminishes public or political ambition, suggesting a hope for spiritual renewal similar to Wordsworth's reflections on nature. Inevitably, Waley's version adds a faint romantic haze to Tao Qian's lyrical imagining of a passage from the *Analects*, but Empson has correctly seized upon the structural principle of antithesis crucial to Chinese poetry.[8] The impact of Waley's Chinese translations on the parsing of ambiguity has not received due attention. Empson later generously acknowledged a debt to Waley, claiming that the 'basic virtue of Waley's mind' was exemplified by 'a large capacity to accept the assumptions of any worldview, without assuming any merit for our own'.[9]

FN:7

FN:8

FN:9

The terms of this praise are, of course, equally applicable to Empson's world-view. 'One reason I wanted to come East,' he informed I. A. Richards in 1932 'was to find out what teaching was like across so large a gulf' (*SL* 46). It was Richards's example as a visiting professor at Qinghua University in

[6] Arthur Waley, *Chinese Poems* (London: Unwin, 1961), 94.

[7] Tao Qian's poem alludes to a celebrated passage from the *Analects* (the first part of XI. 26) in which Confucius discusses with three interlocutors the meaning of happiness.

[8] 'There is a natural tendency in Chinese [poetry] towards antithesis'; James J. Y. Liu, *The Art of Chinese Poetry* (London: Routledge, 1962), 146.

[9] Empson, 'Waley's Courtesy', *New Statesman* (13 Mar. 1964), 410.

Peking that encouraged Empson to take up the life of a peripatetic teacher of English literature.[10] Furthermore, the reference to an educational 'gulf' was a response to Richards's teaching experiences. He had encountered difficulties communicating with his students at Qinghua, who had appeared to him 'nearly as far off as fishes in a tank'.[11] Chinese thought has often appeared puzzling from a Western point of view, although it exhibits—no less than Western thought—clearly articulated patterns of reasoning, prominent among which is a desire for group harmony in the face of social conflict.[12] Curiously, Richards had hoped to understand Chinese psychology by making a highly theoretical study of selected passages from a Confucian disciple, Mencius. His findings were published in *Mencius on the Mind* (1932), a work subtitled 'Experiments in Multiple Definition'. In brief, Richards concluded that Chinese philosophy eschewed the analytical logic of Western tradition in favour of a tacit appeal to shared social norms or values. Abstracted from their social conditions, Mencius's suasive 'gestures' presented formidable problems to the English translator. Richards proposed that these difficulties could be met by listing the full range of meanings covered by key Confucian concepts; for instance, the virtue *ren*. In effect, Richards suggested that the resonant ambiguities of Mencius's writings were more 'poetical' than philosophical. Arthur Waley's review of *Mencius on the Mind* contended that Richards had been misled by an inability to construe ancient Chinese idioms.[13] The controversies surrounding Richards's championing of the efficacy of Chinese-English 'multiple definition' played a crucial role in the development of Empson's critical theories. From the 1930s onwards, Empson's investigations into the prismatic meanings of 'complex words' (and their interconnections) was worked out as a refinement upon Richards's linguistic theory, incorporating a forthright rejection of the emotive theory of value venerating a Confucian 'stable poise'.[14]

[10] After his Cambridge fellowship was terminated, Empson initially told Richards: 'my impulses are not so powerful as to drive me to China.' However, within a few months he reported: 'it is fixed in my mind that I want to go to China' (*SL* 13–16).

[11] Transcribed in the diary of Dorothea Richards, 30 Nov. 1929, Richards Collection, Magdalene College, Cambridge.

[12] This point is amply demonstrated in Richard W. Hartzell, *Harmony in Conflict* (Taipei: Caves, 1988).

[13] Arthur Waley, 'Mencius on the Mind', *Times Liberary Supplement* (15 Sept. 1932), 634.

[14] Lisa A. Rodensky's introduction to the 1995 Penguin editions of *Some Versions of Pastoral* and *The Structure of Complex Words* gives an account of the divergence between Empson and Richards.

The translations of Waley and the critical theories of Richards formed part of the interpretative matrix in which Empson wrestled with the challenge of comprehending and representing China. The compression of the complexities of cultural difference into more readily familiar forms is an invaluable shorthand. Evidently, when Empson lived in the East this textual engagement was overlaid with specific occurrences of the unfamiliar, 'strange' and anomalous on perceptual, linguistic, and intellectual levels, which obliged him to acknowledge the inadequacies of a predominantly textual approach to cultural dislocation. During the three years Empson taught in Tokyo, he strongly disliked Japanese imperialism and the crude ideological stereotypes deployed to justify this military expansion. Empson had accepted a post in Tokyo the day before he received an offer from Peking and this contingency would affect his preconceptions of Chinese society. Many Japanese held deeply unflattering prejudices regarding the Chinese. When the Japanese author of *Rashōmon* published a volume about his travels in China, they amounted to a virulent indictment of the Chinese as an indolent, disorganized, and hopelessly backward people. Empson was shocked when his students reacted chauvinistically to the 1932 battle for Shanghai (*SSS* 206). The necessity of maintaining one's mental equilibrium when confronted by 'conflict' (personal, cultural, political, military) is a cornerstone of Empson's writings. Such urgent, existential tensions understandably led to a degree of ambivalence about Sino-Japanese relations and an eirenic impulse that flattened or softened the differences between these contending Asian civilizations. In the spring of 1933, Empson had the opportunity to inspect China for himself, journeying to Mount Yüngang, north-west of Peking, in search of the massive Buddhist sculptures carved into the sandstone caves. Brooding upon the metaphysics expressed by these statues, he felt emboldened in *Some Versions of Pastoral* to offer the following epitome of Chinese mentality: 'In China the feeling that everything is everything so nothing is worth doing, natural to this mode of thought, was balanced by the Confucian stress on the exact performance of local duties and ceremonies' (*SVP* 24). This remark is consonant with the contrapuntal movements he had discerned in Waley's translations of Chinese poetry. Moreover, the interplay of Buddhist, Taoist, and Confucian traditions was always a feature of his reflections on developments in Chinese civilization. Still, when Empson was 'bowled over' by the Chinese Imperial treasures on display at Burlington House in 1935 there is little to suggest

he had anything more than a slight acquaintance with Chinese society and behaviour.[15]

FN:15

'The dragon hatched a cockatrice': War Poetry

Empson returned to China in August 1937 on a Japanese troop train. He arrived in the country with no linguistic preparation and only a rudimentary grasp of the contemporary political situation. Not surprisingly, the poem 'China'—a miniature essay on the wartime prospects of the Chinese people—deploys cultural stereotypes he had acquired before any direct contact with the Sino-Japanese War.

China

The dragon hatched a cockatrice
(Cheese crumbles and not many mites repair)
There is a Nature about this
(The spring and rawness tantalize the air)

Most proud of being most at ease
(The sea is the most solid ground)
Where comfort is on hands and knees
(The nations perch about around)

Red hills bleed naked into screes
(The classics are a single school—)
The few large trees are holy trees
(—They teach the nations how to rule)

They will not teach the Japanese
(They rule by music and by rites)
They are as like them as two peas
(All nations are untidy sights)

The serious music strains to squeeze
(The angel coolies sing like us—)
Duties, and literature, and fees
(—to lift an under-roaded bus)

The paddy-fields are wings of bees

[15] See Empson, 'The Gifts of China', *Sunday Times* (30 Sept. 1973). For catalogue details of the 1935 exhibition see Leigh Ashton (ed.), *Chinese Art* (London: Kegan Paul, 1935).

(The Great Wall as a dragon crawls—)
To one who flies or one who sees
(—the twisted contour of their walls)
A liver fluke of sheep agrees
Most rightly proud of her complacencies
With snail so well they make one piece
Most wrecked and longest of all histories.

(*CP* 90)

The poem proposes that the Japanese invaders are themselves the offspring of Chinese culture. The Confucian *Analects* taught good government on the basis of the observance of ceremonial rites, literature, and music, but the Japanese will no longer submit to the lessons of their former imperial overlords. China must rely upon her ancient defensive culture, symbolized by the Great Wall, in order to contain the occupying army, as she had once absorbed Mongol and Manchu conquerors. The present sight of China reveals a land in disorder, her hills symbolically 'bleeding' or crumbling as the Japanese soldiers swarm like parasitic mites feeding off a decaying animal, or more disgustingly, a sheep liver fluke that has penetrated and aims to reproduce with the host. 'China' is ultimately sanguine, even optimistic, about the future of Chinese civilization: 'Most wrecked and longest of all histories.' Having witnessed the corrosive effects of Japanese nationalism, Empson chose to underscore the similarities between China and Japan, drawing upon the rhetoric of '*dōbun—dōshu*' (common culture: common race). He wished for a peaceful admixture of these two great Asian civilizations—'two peas' albeit 'untidy sights' in time of war. Empson was mistaken to advocate passivity in the face of the Japanese onslaught, including the 'Rape of Nanjing'. Yet it is churlish to belittle his efforts to maintain an unbroken spirit of optimism as he endured the cold, cramped, and unhygienic conditions of a scholarly refugee during the Sino-Japanese War.[16]

FN:16

'China' is marked by those vertiginous, associative leaps of logic characteristic of Empson's poetry. In that sense, it is a continuation of the witty, erudite, 'metaphysical' *Poems* (1935): the interwoven strands of argument and the analogy of the sheep liver fluke are a twentieth-century rewriting of a seventeenth-century conceit. It is a poetic at the opposite extreme from Pound's wartime collection, *Cathay* (1915), in which an exotic 'Oriental' aura

[16] For a thorough account of Empson's life with the exiled Peking universities, see *WE1* 432–536.

provides the context for a loose, sequence of images. 'China' is a tougher, intellectual poetry of 'argufying' closer to Chinese literary traditions. Empson apprehended from Waley's translations that Chinese classical poetry was rich in ambiguities. Just as Chinese characters convey a variety of homonyms—some of them contradictory—Empson's poem trades on fruitful aural puns. The line 'They rule by music and by rites' evokes both the authoritarian rituals of Confucian tradition and the 'rights' and corresponding duties of Chinese officials which they encode. Similarly, 'The serious music strains to squeeze' combines the double implication of soothing strains of melody with taut, physical endurance. The penultimate line declares 'they make one piece' as an aptly comforting future for two peoples wracked by war. As we have seen, the structural conventions of Chinese classical poetry encourage repetitions, parallels, and antitheses. 'China' switches between the long perspective of the antiquity of Chinese history and the local, present-day trauma inflicted by foreign invaders; it also straddles the gulf between the educated ruling classes and the peasant masses. Out of this dialectical movement emerges a lofty vision of harmony in the midst of conflict. The repeated long e's of the *a*-rhymes (for instance, ease—squeeze—agrees) reproduce the slow, strained, yet disciplined ritual Empson associated with Confucian government. The longevity of Chinese civilization itself exemplifies the cyclical spring renewal voiced in Empson's notes to the poem: 'The prolonged disorder of China made everything feel crumbling like cheese but with an effect of new growth trying to start as in inclement spring weather' (*CP* 373).

Empson's poetry was softened by sifting and reflecting upon his remarkable experiences in China. As J. H. Willis has pointed out, Empson's 'most autobiographical poem', namely 'Autumn on Nan-Yüeh', a lengthy, chatty excursion on the themes of 'flight, escapism, courage and political involvement', is characterized by 'the relaxed and conversational phrases of his later style'.[17] Like a number of the poems collected in *The Gathering Storm* (1940), it contemplates the dilemmas that arise when honour dictates standing one's ground, or when flight is the better part of valour. In fact, *flight* is a key word in the poem expressing a complex range of related meanings: wartime aerial bombardment; the migrations of displaced populations; political appeasement; and the elevated 'otherworldly' vantage point of the Buddhist and

FN:17

[17] See J. H. Willis, *William Empson* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1969), 44.

Taoist monks, whose temples and monastic complexes—centres of scholarship, art, and religious culture—dotted the mountain summit of Nan-Yüeh. The poet's detached, wry perspective on the imminent global conflagration is combined with more pressing anxieties about teaching without essential resources, such as library books. Empson elaborated: 'men get curiously non-plussed | Searching the memory for a clue', completing the rhyme 'Let textual variants be discussed; | We teach a poem as it grew' (*CP* 92). His colleagues at Nan-Yüeh frequently recited Chinese classical poems from memory.[18] The trace of these recitations is apparent in the themes of Chinese poetry found in 'Autumn on Nan-Yüeh': the war-torn frontier; rapture with wine; and anecdotal parables and jokes from the origins of Chinese literary tradition.

FN:18

The poem, of course, is also inflected by English traditions of 'wit' and 'pastoral'. Still, the effect is curious and arresting. As the Japanese began to bomb nearby Changsha, 'Autumn on Nan-Yüeh' closes with a sober meditation upon the Xiang River winding its way through maples and pines in the first chill of winter:

> We have had the Autumn here. But oh
> That lovely balcony is lost
> Just as the mountains take the snow.
> The soldiers will come here and train.
> The stream will chatter as they flow.
>
> (*CP* 97–8)

The chattering, flowing stream echoes Henry Vaughan's 'singing' streams that 'both run and speak'.[19] When contemplating the sacred Chinese mountain where the great Tang dynasty poet and wanderer Li Bai had composed, Empson is drawn to the life's flow of a seventeenth-century meditative poet in retreat from the English Civil War. Yet it would be strange if Empson's rapt contemplation of the Chinese landscape was not influenced by the paintings, calligraphic scrolls, silk tapestries, lacquered panels, and blue-and-white willow porcelain he had inspected in museums and galleries; or by those evocative mists and mountain streams he had encountered in Waley's translations of Chinese poetry. For example, compare Empson's version of pastoral with this

FN:19

[18] See Empson's comments in 'A Comparison Between the British and Chinese Approach to Poetry', *P.E.N. News* (Nov. 1957), 18.

[19] Empson quoted the relevant lines from Vaughan's 'The Bird' in *STA* 205.

extract from Waley's rendering of the Tang poet Bo Ju-yi ruminating upon his wartime exile:

> This year there is war in An-hui,
> In every place soldiers are rushing to arms.
> Men of learning have been summoned to the Council Board;
> Only I, who have no talents at all,
> Am left in the mountains to play with the pebbles of the stream.[20]

FN:20

Empson's meditation on the urgency of the great political issues of the day is set against the grand backdrop of the perennial cycles of nature, thus recalling his commentary upon the clash of time-scales in Waley's translation from Tao Qian. It is evidence of the rich confluence of intercultural sources that flow together in 'Autumn on Nan-Yüeh'.

Empson's poetic treatment of China adroitly resists the Orientalist appeal of the 'exotic East' as portrayed in the translations of Pound and Waley, both of whom were imaginative rather than actual voyagers to the East. This does not mean that Empson was able to express the 'real China' but his efforts to fathom the disconcerting effects of an alien environment bear a favourable comparison with Auden and Isherwood's account of their travels in China during the Sino-Japanese War.[21] Auden and Isherwood, as Au Dung and Y Hsiao Wu, embarked on their wartime journey in a fanfare of publicity and a spirit that Isherwood characterized as 'an irresponsible, schoolboyish feeling of excitement'.[22] 'Autumn on Nan-Yüeh' contained a 'smack' at Auden in the astringent asides on politically inspired 'Up the Boys' verses characteristic of 1930s English poetry. All the same, Empson supplemented his classes on seventeenth-century metaphysical poetry with more propagandist material; including the oratorical, allegorical didacticism of Auden's *Spain*.[23] In a letter home, Empson remarked that after 'all these beastly little lovers of the Far East have slunk off', he was resolved to make 'a reasonable show of not deserting the

FN:21

FN:22

FN:23

[20] Waley, *Chinese Poems*, 146.

[21] For a stimulating account of Auden, Isherwood and Empson's dealings with the Sino-Japanese War, see Hugh Haughton, 'Journeys to War: Auden, Isherwood and Empson n China', in Douglas Kerr and Julia Kuehn (eds.), *Travellers in China* (Hong Kong: University of Hong Kong Press, 2007).

[22] See W. H. Auden and Christopher Isherwood, *Journey to a War* (London: Faber, 1939), 28–9.

[23] Empson's lectures on modern poetry were recalled by Wang Zuoliang in 'William Empson in Kunming', *Foreign Literatures*, 1 (1980), 2–3. I am grateful to Dr Yumei Hsu for her translation of the Chinese.

Chinese intellectuals entirely' (cited in *WE1* 502–3). In a pro-Chinese article published in 1940, he declared: 'getting the intellectuals out of Peking and making them look at "the interior" has been an obviously healthy change.'[24] The changes effected by Empson's wartime experiences can be gauged from his decision to recite to his Chinese colleagues Satan's stirring address to the fallen angels in *Paradise Lost* (*MG* 45; *WE1* 539–40). When pondering why this speech seemed so apposite in 1939, it is worth recalling another occasion recounted in *Milton's God* when Empson identified with Satan. During a stopover on his flight home, he climbed a hill and began a bout of screaming. Empson compared this hilltop crisis en route from China (itself a reflection of the crises *on* a mountain in China), with the despair, doubt, and loneliness felt by Satan on Mount Niphates (*MG* 67). Getting intellectuals into war zones—conflicts which generated primal screaming—precipitated infernal tensions which would reverberate throughout his subsequent writings.

'The confusion of a liberation': Criticism and Propaganda

The essays Empson began on Nan-Yüeh and pieced together in *The Structure of Complex Words* (1951) amounted to a rejection of the translation theory of 'multiple definition' advanced in *Mencius on the Mind*. Empson's investigation into the crystalline structures of key words was predicated upon the subtle interconnections of emotive and cognitive uses of poetic language—as determined by their immediate (socio-political) context. Or viewed from another angle, a good critic possesses a contextual understanding sufficient to explain implicit value judgements to a foreign reader. The unpacking of complex words was interrupted by Empson's Second World War duties at the Chinese Section of the BBC's Far Eastern Service, where he was chiefly responsible for radio broadcasts to China and propaganda features on China for the Home Service. Empson informed Richards he was 'definitely an all-time propaganda hack' (*SL* 133–6). An extant draft typescript of the BBC feature, 'China on the March', broadcast in April 1942, reveals how conscientiously he tackled these programmes. The broadcast was arranged in the form of round-table discussion among various British observers of China's predicament.

[24] Empson, 'A Chinese University', *Life and Letters* (25 June 1940), 243.

Speaker 'E' (a teacher from a refugee Chinese university) voiced Empson's own opinions on the Chinese Communists and the Nationalist Government. 'E' took a long-term optimistic view of the evolution of Chinese democratic society following the eventual defeat of the Japanese. Further, 'E' drew on Empson's first-hand experience to suggest that the Chinese were uniting to achieve this common goal.[25] When he came to revise and expand his pre-war essays, Empson argued that propaganda habitually employs stereotypical spokesmen in order to 'sum up a complex matter briefly' (*SCW* 51, 58–9). This is not telling lies and Empson was, at any rate, sceptical of the efficacy of 'purely emotive' propaganda. He resisted Richards's thesis in *Mencius on the Mind* defending the social uses of a rhetoric imposing doctrines.

Empson had plenty of opportunity to ponder the impositions of political rhetoric when he returned to China in 1947 to resume his teaching position at National Peking University. Here he witnessed the six-week siege of Peking in 1948 and the Communist Liberation, including the proclamation of the People's Republic of China on 1 October 1949. *The Structure of Complex Words* was, in Empson's own words, 'greatly expanded and rewritten' between 1947 and 1951 in 'very agreeable circumstances in Peking' (*SCW*, pp. xxvii, xvi). If this remark sounds odd, an Australian acquaintance, the anthropologist C. P. Fitzgerald, has claimed that during the years of Empson's second stint in China, Peking was a wonderful place for foreign professors: 'The most delicious and happiest, pleasantest way of life you could have imagined anywhere.'[26] Empson played down the dangers of venturing beyond the city walls during the siege of Peking, in order to teach a weekly class on Shakespeare. 'When I was crossing the fighting lines during the siege of Peking' he remembered, 'a generous-minded peasant barred my way and said, pointing ahead: "That way lies death". "Not for me, I have a British passport" was the answer that sprang to the lips, and I was right' (*SL* 550). Chinese culture and beliefs could invoke defamiliarizing angles of comparison in the chapters he was writing for *The Structure of Complex Words*. Discussing the benefits of worldly renunciation in *King Lear*, Empson

[25] The typescript of 'China on the March' is among the Empson Papers in the Houghton Library, Harvard. Scripts of BBC radio programmes involving Empson and George Orwell are included in *Orwell: The War Broadcasts*, ed. W. J. West (London: Duckworth, 1985).

[26] Michael Hollington, 'Richards and Empson in China: The Recollections of Professor C. P. ("Possum") Fitzgerald', *AUMLA* (1996), 90–1. In 1950, Empson told John Hayward: 'There is still the beautiful city [Peking] and the charming good humour and the best food in the world' (*SL* 184).

argued that this is 'not too Buddhist an idea to occur to Shakespeare' (*SCW* 138). Asides of this sort perplexed less world-minded English critics. Shortly after the publication of *The Structure of Complex Words*, Frank Kermode said that he was puzzled by the reference to Buddhist meditation in Empson's essay on Marvell's 'The Garden'.[27] Empson replied, somewhat gruffly, that he was not suggesting Marvell had studied Buddhism, but rather: 'We have only two or three independent civilizations to compare, developing in parallel through thousands of years, it has a steadying effect to compare them.'[28] For Kermode, crossing swords with Empson in this period left one feeling the narrowness of one's own point of view. 'I think he was very conscious of the breadth and variety of his own experience,' he later reflected, 'and so thought us all narrow and tame, venturing our pathetic little audacities from positions of bourgeois security.'[29]

Undoubtedly no champion of bourgeois security, Empson had shared in the great sense of expectation surrounding the Communist liberation of China. He recorded, in a vivid eyewitness account, the excitement enveloping the triumphant entry of the Red Army (the People's Liberation Army) into Tiananmen Square.[30] Empson felt sympathetic towards the Communist soldiers during the siege and subsequent takeover: 'I was greatly struck by the beautiful evangelistic feelings of the troops, all consciously and confidently redeeming and redeemed', adding: 'I admired the feelings of many other Chinese during the following two years' (*MG* 255). He was extremely moved by the patriotic folk nationalism of a Peking University performance of the *Yellow River Cantata*.[31] In 1951, he produced a fine adaptation of a proto-Communist peasant ballad.[32] The poem, cast in what Empson called the 'international ballad metre', delightfully reworks Li Chi's country ballad about a separating wartime couple who intermix two clay dolls, a variation on the topoi of enforced farewells and stoicism found in Chinese classical poetry (Empson cites the example of Yuan poet Chao Meng-fu) (*CP* 400–1). Endurance was clearly a Chinese virtue that Empson admired and imitated.

[27] See Empson, 'The Argument of Marvell's "Garden" ', *Essays in Criticism* (July 1952), 225–41.
[28] See Empson, 'The Critical Forum', *Essays in Criticism* (Jan. 1953), 114–20.
[29] Frank Kermode, *An Appetite for Poetry* (London: Fontana, 1990), 118.
[30] See 'Red on Red', *London Review of Books* (30 Sept. 1999), 66–7.
[31] 'I thought it hauntingly beautiful, all the more in the late dusk in the great square with a tense audience waiting for the liberation of the city'; Empson, 'Pei-Ta before the Siege', *Arrows* (Autumn 1961), 6.
[32] First published as 'Chinese Peasant Song', *Nine* (Summer-Autumn 1952), 316.

The impact of epochal events in Chinese history also had a palpable, if indirect, influence on his critical writing. Consider the provocatively offhand reference in *The Structure of Complex Words* to Cordelia's avoidable death: 'just the kind of thing that happens in the confusion of a "liberation" ' (*SCW* 154). Empson knew everyday life under the conditions of a civil war and the sort of thing that can happen during a liberation. 'The "liberation" of the city [Peking],' he recalled 'was very snidely given that name, even by Europeans, though in Europe of course liberating a hen had come to mean stealing it for dinner.'[33] Cordelia's 'liberation' was a tragic delusion for Lear.[34] Empson's reflections upon this key word were soaked in experience, more so than those of Richards, who delighted to see China returning to former glories. He had accepted Empson's invitation to lecture in Peking after the inauguration of the People's Republic of China, but he remained sadly unaware of the manner in which the intellectual climate had begun to deteriorate under Communism.[35] Empson maintained that during his time at Peking University 'thought control' usually took the form of a tiresome 'nagging' from committees of colleagues and students, rather than the police terrors later initiated during the Cultural Revolution. He described this process as 'the dragooning of independent thought and the hysteria of the confession meetings' (*SSS* 217). Empson recalled his students in Peking with affectionate regret as 'dialectical materialists of course, their eyes shining with idealism' (*A* 118). He later claimed to have been resident in Peking during 'the honeymoon between the universities and the Communists, which was scarcely over when I left in 1952'.[36] Once again, he refused to gainsay what he had witnessed. 'It seems natural in England by this time to give a pretty gloomy jeer at the term "liberation" ' he told his Sheffield colleagues and students at his inaugural lecture in 1953, yet his Peking students 'honestly did think they were liberated from serious danger when the Communist troops finally walked in' (*SSS* 214). Empson became extremely irritated with the CIA-funded *Encounter* magazine in 1955 when he felt it

FN:33 FN:34 FN:35 FN:36

[33] Empson, 'Pei-Ta before the Siege', 8.

[34] 'The power of the last speech comes from the repeated delusions, the boasting, the pretence that Cordelia is still alive' (*SCW* 151).

[35] According to George Watson, Richards claimed to be a 'great admirer' of Mao Tse-Tung throughout the years of the Cultural Revolution. See *Never Ones for Theory?* (Cambridge: Lutterworth, 2000).

[36] Empson, 'Pei-Ta before the Siege', 8.

deliberately misrepresented the political opinions of a Peking acquaintance, Fei Hsiao-Tung.[37]

When the Chinese Communist Government failed to renew his British Council teaching contract, Empson apparently reacted angrily, banging his fist on a table.[38] This may be true, but the news also undoubtedly provided a measure of relief. For one thing, Empson was having increasing difficulty communicating with his two sons, who were educated at a Chinese school.[39] His failure to speak Mandarin after seven years is arguably evidence of conflicted feelings about long-term adaptation to life in Communist China.[40] 'My impression of Empson abroad', observed Graham Hough, who met Empson several times in Asia, 'is always of an uncompromisingly English figure.'[41] According to Haffenden, Empson remained through his years of exile 'too much the Englishman ever to seek assimilation' (*WE1* 346). In fact, in a letter to Haffenden, Empson said that he had failed to integrate with Chinese society and had 'probably missed a great deal' (*SL* 672–3). Yet a first-hand awareness of the difficulties of acculturation can also be a powerful teacher. On the day before he was due to sail from China, Empson had his passport taken from him, without any explanation, leaving him to fret anxiously.[42] A fortnight later, aboard a P. & O. ship in Hong Kong finally bound for home, he sighed: 'It was like diving out of intense heat into a deep cool pool' (*SSS* 217). Nobody could suggest that Empson's years in China were easy, but in common with Milton's fiercely independent Satan, alienation and torment could be a source of knowledge and pride—a badge of integrity gestured to in controversies with less world-minded critics.

'The gifts of China': Buddhist Enlightenment

The most enduring legacy of Empson's sojourn in China was the tendency to draw upon thought-systems beyond the ambit of the Christian West,

[37] See *WE2* 237–71.

[38] See Mark Thompson, 'Letters to the Editor', *Times Liberary Supplement* (8 July 2005), 15.

[39] See *SL* 184. According to Empson's eldest son, Mogador (b. 1942), the need to start an English education and fear over the possible escalation of the Korean War were the main reasons the Empsons left Peking in 1952. E-mail to Jason Harding, 10 Apr. 2006.

[40] For Empson's early impressions of the challenge, see 'Learning Chinese', *Night and Day* (19 Aug. 1937).

[41] See *London Review of Books* (4 July 1984), 16.

[42] Empson mentions this incident in *MG* 263–4.

achieving a double perspective conceptually (and apparently morally) broader and of greater complexity. In *Milton's God*, he delivered a sustained polemic against the Christian, or neo-Christian, orthodoxy that was, in his eyes, corrupting English literary criticism. It was an indictment founded upon detailed readings of the epic but also on pungently expressed personal testimony. On his return from Communist China, Empson informed readers, he had found neo-Christian assumptions 'widespread' (*MG* 230). This new orthodoxy, he felt, caused critics to misinterpret Milton's real intentions in *Paradise Lost*. Empson countered T. S. Eliot's assertion that Satan's rallying speech to his troops was devoid of rhetorical power. Had Empson not read this speech to his Chinese colleagues and pupils in 1939 and witnessed the thrilling effect it had on an audience susceptible to wartime propaganda?[43] Empson maintained that his wartime work for the BBC was an advantage in understanding the literary sophistication of a fellow wartime propagandist, Milton. Neo-Christians, venturing complacent pieties from positions of safety, could scarcely be expected to appreciate this point; nor did their fastidious sensibilities allow them to empathize with Satan's anguish on Mount Niphates: the torment of an aristocratic pride that, according to Empson, Milton depicted as very far from contemptible. Fit readers should, he argued, 'feel the agony of his ruined greatness' and also 'horror at the God who has deliberately reduced him to such a condition' (*MG* 69–70). Pride and honour, he declared with the assurance of a scion of landowning Yorkshire gentry, are aristocratic virtues that could lead to suffering, doubt, and despair. There is something decidedly cavalier about Empson's dismissal of a generation of bourgeois academic puritans.

FN:43

The attack on the Christian God was underpinned by comparative anthropology. *Milton's God* argued that, unlike Chinese civilization, which had abandoned a craving for ritual human sacrifice to embrace Buddhism and Confucianism, the Christian West had regressed into the worship of a sadistic God who tortures and sacrifices his Son. Empson suggested the fundamental difference between the East and the West was not racial but theological.[44]

FN:44

[43] '[Satan's speech] was received with fierce enthusiasm, but also with a mild groan from some of the older [Chinese] hands, who felt they had been having enough propaganda already' (*MG* 45).

[44] See *MG* 236–42. Note also: 'In the West, the supreme God is a person, in the East He is not . . . It is much the most fundamental line of division between the civilizations of the world, and we need to understand the people on the other side'; Empson, 'Ballet of the Far East', *Listener* (7 July 1937), 16.

There is little doubt his distaste for, and impatience with, the cruelty latent in Christian doctrine was exacerbated by the years he spent in China. Empson commented: 'it wasn't till I began teaching in a Christian country that I realized the active harm done by the religion' (*SL* 426). However, Empson was never as enthusiastic about Confucianism as Richards or Pound (in his eccentric fashion). By the time Empson arrived in China, Confucian thought was associated with the corruption and political reaction of the Qing dynasty. By contrast, Empson felt a profound sympathy with the teachings of the Buddha. John Haffenden has shown how extensive was Empson's engagement with Buddhism. He travelled in search of Buddhist sculpture at a time when Western art critics were groping towards a deeper understanding of its iconography. Empson was convinced by Alfred Foucher's theory that Buddhist art showed the impact of Hellenism.[45] In effect, he was seeking to bridge the theological 'gap' between East and West. In his introduction to a 1933 Japanese edition of T. S. Eliot's *Selected Essays*, Empson instructed his readers to think of Buddhism when Christian tradition was mentioned, or when Eliot attacked the romantic artist's self-expressive 'personality' (*A* 566–9). Empson was never a Buddhist disciple and he did not practise meditation; he said that he would not encourage his children to become disciples. None the less a respect for Buddhism is pervasive in his writings. It may even be that Buddhism was a factor behind his loss of interest in writing poetry. The poem 'Let it Go', published while Empson lived in Peking, announced an abandonment of any further analytical worrying at the intractable conflicts of selfhood:

FN:45

> The contradictions cover such a range.
> The talk would talk and go so far aslant.
> You don't want madhouse and the whole thing there.
>
> (*CP* 99)

The renunciation of 'Let it Go' exemplifies Empson's belief that life is inadequate to the human spirit. The stoical endurance of 'Autumn on Nan-Yüeh' had superseded the witty, metaphysical passion of his earlier poetry. 'Let it Go' divests itself from an attachment to conflicted desires. Empson told Christopher Ricks: 'I just found in Peking I was writing some [poems] and it struck me they were bad, I didn't want to print them.' He

[45] See Alfred Foucher, *The Beginnings of Buddhist Art* (London: Humphrey Milford, 1917).

surmised: 'The motives which made me want to write had I suppose largely disappeared.'[46]

Haffenden has suggested that 'Let it Go' is essentially an argument in favour of 'moral and mental health'; but he doesn't add that the proposed balm is consistent with the precepts of Mahayana Buddhism (*RB* 23). In an early draft talk, Empson had referred to the Buddha's 'Fire Sermon' as 'a supreme example of the beauty of at any rate one sort of death wish in an almost pure form' (*A* 535).[47] He ameliorated this nihilism by mention of the attractions of Nirvana. 'The basic position', Empson explained 'is that Buddhists believe in abandoning selfhood, sometimes interpreted as merging oneself into the Absolute or the impersonal Godhead.'[48] The decision to reprint his own translation of the Buddha's 'Fire Sermon' as an epigraph to *Collected Poems* caused something of a stir in England. Empson responded to misunderstandings by saying: 'I think Buddhism much better than Christianity, because it managed to get away from the Neolithic craving to gloat over human sacrifice; but even so I feel that it should be applied cautiously.'[49] He informed his Sheffield students: 'Buddhism obviously deserves respect; for one thing, though not only, as an extreme; it needs to be remembered when one tries to survey what the human mind could think about a subject. But I naturally would not want to present myself as a believer by mistake.'[50] The exasperation displayed in Empson's replies was fuelled by the conviction that his audience was obstinately provincial. He put the matter bluntly: 'The Europeans have got to realize that Asia really exists' (*CP* 150).

'Would that somebody could tell adequately what Empson did through his long years in Peking!' exclaimed I. A. Richards in the 1974 Festschrift *William Empson: The Man and His Work* (cited in *CP* 150). In his meticulous biography, John Haffenden concluded: 'In a spiritual or intellectual sense at least, Empson's

[46] See Ian Hamilton (ed.), *The Modern Poet: Essays from The Review* (London: MacDonald, 1968), 177. Empson explained to Ricks he nursed himself 'back into literary work' by writing a book on the faces of the Buddha (*SL* 597).

[47] Empson commented: 'The early Buddhist position, not offering an argument for its assertion that all existence is suffering, cannot be refuted so easily; and I understand that scholars increasingly suspect it . . . of an assumption that Nirvana is not merely a blowing-out of a flame but a reabsorption into the Absolute' (*SCW* 424).

[48] Empson, 'Everything, Beggars, is on fire', *Arrows* (1957), 5.

[49] Empson, 'Mr Empson and the Fire Sermon', *Essays in Criticism* (Oct. 1956), 481.

[50] Empson, 'Everything, Beggars, is on fire', 6.

passionate interest in Buddhism and its iconography gave him a large part of the authority for his very presence in China' (*WE1* 448). We will be better able to assess the justice of this remark after Haffenden has edited the recently recovered manuscript of Empson's treatise on the faces of the Buddha. Buddhist iconography was without doubt a source of wisdom and comfort, a soothing effect mentioned by Empson in his response to the 1973 Chinese Exhibition at the Royal Academy, entitled 'the gifts of China'.[51] The 'gifts' bestowed by China complicated and unsettled the perspectives he had acquired through books. More than that, his experience of encounters with Chinese people and places opened challenging and invigorating new imaginative horizons. 'We have only two or three independent civilizations to compare', to repeat Empson's words to Kermode shortly after his return from Peking and 'it has a steadying effect to compare them'.[52] The professional trade of 'Eng. Lit.', he never ceased to warn, has a great need of these expansive world-views. His own years in China taught him about the necessity of maintaining one's balance when faced with conflicting socio-cultural values. 'It may be that the human mind can recognize actually incommensurable values,' Empson observed in *The Structure of Complex Words*, adding tellingly: 'the chief human value is to stand up between them, but I do not see how we could know that they were incommensurable till the calculation had been attempted' (*SCW* 421). Here the literary critic could be an invaluable guide. The importance of China to Empson across his career lends a particular richness to his oft quoted remark: 'The central purpose of reading imaginative literature is to grasp a wide variety of experience, imagining people with codes and customs very unlike our own' (*A* 218).

FN:51

FN:52

[51] 'The mature periods of Chinese art, and the introduction of Buddhism, take effect almost as soothers'; Empson, 'The Gifts of China', 27.

[52] Empson, 'The Critical Forum', 115.